

#240 RUSSELL LOTT
USS *ARIZONA*, SURVIVOR

ROLL 9 OF 27

INTERVIEWED ON
DECEMBER 4, 1996

TRANSCRIBED BY:
CARA KIMURA
JUNE 8, 1997

(Background conversation)

Michael Stucky (MS): The following oral history interview was conducted by Michael Stucky for the National Park Service, USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, at the Sheraton Waikiki on December 4, 1996 at five o'clock p.m. The person being interviewed is Russell Lott, who was on board USS *ARIZONA* on December 7, 1941.

Russ, for the record, would you state your full name please?

Russell Lott (RL): All three?

MS: All.

RL: Russell Ardell Lott.

MS: And where were you born, sir?

RL: Born on a farm near Kingsley, Iowa.

MS: Kingsley, Iowa. And what year was that?

RL: Nineteen-twenty.

MS: And birth date?

RL: January 19.

MS: Very good. That makes it official. Now, when did you join the Navy?

RL: Well, I was accepted in 1937, but they didn't take me until January '38. They wanted me for four years.

MS: And that was in January '38?

RL: Yeah.

MS: Okay. So you had some veteran service before the war actually began. Was that on *ARIZONA*?

RL: You mean my sea service?

MS: Yes.

RL: Yeah, it was the *ARIZONA*.

MS: And where was basic training before that?

RL: It was in Great Lakes.

MS: Great Lakes. So you went to the *ARIZONA* right after basic?

RL: Yeah.

MS: And where did you join her?

RL: Bremerton Navy Yard.

MS: Bremerton. She was completing some overhaul?

RL: She was getting a new paint job and a bunch of other work on her.

MS: I see. So you came over with the fleet. What did you think of duty in Hawaii after the fleet came over from San Pedro?

RL: Well, it was kind of a fun thing.

MS: Yeah. Good liberties?

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: How about places like the YMCA and the Black Cat and some of the other . . .

RL: Oh, we used to hit the Black Cat. I even brought one of the menus along from 1941. I got it in my stuff down there.

MS: Hey, that's great.

RL: And well, most of the places sold beer, we hit a lot of 'em.

MS: Did you get down here to Waikiki in that time period?

RL: I only got out here just several times. They had a place out there they called the Waikiki Tavern. We used to get out to see that.

MS: Well, it's changed a whole lot in fifty-five years, hasn't it? Now, when you were in port for that weekend, did you have liberty or duty on the sixth?

RL: On December?

MS: Yeah. On the seventh?

RL: Well, me and my bow hook were ashore the night of the sixth. I don't know, you could feel something -- it just felt a little uneasy, so we went back to shipboard again. Then we had duty the next day. We didn't have any trips to make, so we were just going to loaf around all day. But we didn't get all day.

MS: You had kind of a funny feeling of something going to . . .

RL: Just the whole atmosphere in the town. It just didn't feel right.

MS: Hmm. Was this something that other people were talking about that kind of come up in conversation?

RL: Well, we knew for some time that we were going to get mixed up in something, but this particular night it just felt a little uneasy.

MS: So you knew that war with Japan was going to come -- it was just a matter of when and where?

RL: Yeah.

MS: Anybody ever feel that Pearl Harbor or Hawaii would be a target?

RL: No, not at that time because we were under the assumption that we would whip anybody and I'm kind of glad it worked out the way it did.

MS: So some mis-assumptions on the Japanese and the Americans at the beginning then?

RL: Well, yeah. I got a good book that was written by Homer Wallin, and his birthday was on December 6 and he was a commander on the *CALIFORNIA*. They left him in charge of cleaning up that mess. And in his book, in the final appraisal, he pointed out it was a good thing we got hit in shallow water.

MS: That's right. Recovery of the fleet wouldn't have been nearly as complete.

RL: If we were out in deep water, they still went out in deep water.

MS: Yeah, that's right. So you were able to come in, come back to the ship relatively early that evening?

RL: Yeah, we got back well before midnight. Yeah.

MS: And the next morning, did you have any duty or were you . . .

RL: No, we -- well, we had duty as far as liberty was concerned, but we had nothing to do.

MS: Okay. So what -- were you sleeping, then, when things . . .

RL: No, we were up at five o'clock. We had chow and it was a small group of us -- oh, I suppose half a dozen of us up on the boat deck just waiting for colors and that's when everything come unglued.

MS: So you were on the deck?

RL: Yeah, we was up on topside.

MS: And when did you know things were not going right.

RL: Well, I don't know if you're familiar with the procedures, but for morning colors, they put a flag up there they call prep. That goes up at 7:55. Eight o'clock, it comes down, and colors goes up. Well, prep was still in the air when we saw the first planes.

MS: Were they coming above, a high altitude or a low altitude?

RL: No, they were coming in low, over the hills there. See if I can get my directions right. More of a northeast direction.

MS: Okay.

RL: And the first bombs we saw exploding was down in the Naval air station.

MS: Further down on Ford Island?

RL: Yeah, down on the southern tip.

MS: Uh-huh. So did it take a while for general quarters to be sounded?

RL: I never did hear general quarters.

MS: Never heard it.

RL: I went to my battle station immediately.

MS: Where was that?

RL: Up in this port aircraft director.

MS: Okay. Taking a couple of minutes to get up there normally from that station?

RL: Took me about five seconds.

MS: (Chuckles) Was there any doubt in your mind when you saw the planes and things started to happen that it was war and did you feel -- was there rumors or anything like that?

RL: Well, I saw the first bomb explosion. I knew I was in for it.

MS: Okay.

RL: And we was kind of in a bad situation because we had the ship along side of us, so that limited our field of fire. And . . .

MS: The *VESTAL*?

RL: So we just didn't get to do too much.

MS: Well, so you got to your battle station and that was just a very short time from the time that you realized things were not going right. Probably there was a lot of activity in the harbor.

RL: Over in nine minutes.

MS: Did you have a chance to shoot back, to speak of?

RL: Not me, but I think several of the guns had fired. And once, when I looked out as director, right down to the anti-aircraft gun below, there was a shell standing in the fuse pod, but by this

time we had a lot of fire. So I pulled my head back in and the next time I looked, that shell was gone. (Inaudible)

MS: So, do you recall or do you have a feeling that the *ARIZONA* was hit by a torpedo before the big bomb blast?

RL: I'm pretty sure it was torpedo hit. And I'm pretty sure it all come out when the (inaudible) her work.

MS: So, you were on top when the altitude bomber dropped its bomb and came through the paddle magazine and exploded on the *ARIZONA*, and then what happened next?

RL: Well, there's a bunch of controversy in that too, because when you're laying in port like that, a lot of times you get the magazines vents are open. And if you get a good fire on top side, it's going to go anyway. So . . .

MS: So you're not sure exactly where that thing, how things actually started that way?

RL: Well, it was one bomber, I saw when it was released, and it landed on our boat deck. Someplace, about number four, number six anti-aircraft gun. And after that, it was just nothing but a series of explosions.

MS: So you probably got hit by two bombs very, very close together?

RL: Oh yeah. Some said ten and some said eight, and some had no idea, but I told 'em, I said, "Well, after the first two, it doesn't matter."

MS: That's right. Things sort of exploded internally.

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: And so what happened to you then with the explosion?

RL: Well, there was mass confusion almost, but I was in behind this range finder, so I couldn't jump out of it right away. These other guys all jumped out. That's why most of 'em got burnt pretty bad. And the one guy who was a second class bosun mate, I said, "We got to get out of here."

And he said, "We ain't going to get off of here."

Well, I got the guy on the *VESTAL* to throw a line over to us, and we had six of us come out of there.

MS: How did you get over to the *VESTAL* then?

RL: On these lines, hand over hand, like a band of monkeys.

MS: All of you?

RL: Yeah.

MS: Was there any danger of that line catching on fire? Were you kind of in a hurry to get ahead of that fire?

RL: Well, it was a boat falls, about 5 inch lines, so it wasn't going to burn too quick. I've often wondered since whatever happened to them, because they were still secured to that director platform when they took the *VESTAL* out of there.

MS: Was it?

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: Now, you were able to get to that line without going too far from where you were when the bomb hit?

RL: Well, we had it secured right to the rear rudder under the director.

MS: Right there, at that . . .

RL: Yeah.

MS: . . . position, so you were able to just go right from your position . . .

RL: Yeah, take right off.

MS: Anything going through your mind in particular that you remember at that time?

RL: Nothing. I was just scared silly.

MS: (Chuckles) Just reacting more, then, I guess, than anything else.

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: Did you, at the time that you were getting back across to the *VESTAL*, did you have any desire to try to get back to the *ARIZONA*, to try to save her, or was there anything . . .

RL: No, not at that point, because have you ever seen a color picture of that blast? That's one reason why I didn't want to go back.

MS: And the *VESTAL* was getting hurt from that blast . . .

RL: She had a hole through her. She was in a sinking condition.

MS: Yeah. What happened next, after you get to the *VESTAL* and you realized you're in one piece and still alive and you were able to . . .

RL: Well, I helped to get some guys out of the water and there was a lot of noise about who cut those lines over there too, but they were cut on the *VESTAL* side.

MS: They were?

RL: You bet your life because I put twelve days on the *VESTAL*, heavy floater, and you can see "x" marks in the chalks.

MS: Okay.

RL: And the guy that cut those lines up there, he's the guy that line over to us.

MS: So he was cutting some lines and throwing other lines to get people out of there?

RL: Well, my part, getting people out, we just pick 'em out of the water between the two ships and came up, get 'em in a motor launch.

MS: So, were you able to get down to the motor launch and start that procedure right away, or was there other things going on before?

RL: Oh, we just carry them as far as the gangway, then they took them (inaudible) on down.

MS: Okay. Is that what occupied your time for . . .

RL: Oh yeah, yeah.

MS: . . . after the --- well the attack was obviously still under way.

RL: Yeah, I should have brought that note along and showed it to you, from Paul Stillwell. He gave me credit for being a major player in saving lives.

MS: Well, how many folks do you think you helped pull out there?

RL: Well, there was six of us in the director and if I hadn't got that line over to it, we wouldn't have got out of there. Then, out of the water, I don't know how many guys we took out of there.

MS: And were most of those from the *ARIZONA*?

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: So, things happened pretty quick since the *ARIZONA* . . .

RL: Yeah, awful quick.

MS: . . . pretty early on.

RL: Yeah.

MS: How about the rest of the time of the attack? You were just busy helping guys get out of the water and get safe? And did you have a chance to give back as far as the battle action, or this is where you were in the life saving?

RL: I was just involved in helping get people out of the water and do what we could on the *VESTAL*.

MS: After your hand over hand, almost -- you probably felt like you were almost in a trapeze act or something, didn't you?

(Chuckles)

MS: What about when things, a little bit later, when things started to calm down as far as the actual attack, it was starting to taper off, were you still pulling people out of the water, or was there any . . .

RL: No, but as soon as we got squared away, we took the *VESTAL* and they gave an assistant tug, but she had [*reciprocating*]

engines on there, so she could get under way with little steam power. And we run her aground over at Aiea, about a mile across the harbor there.

MS: Okay. And you were able to stay with the *VESTAL*.

RL: I stayed with her for about twelve days.

MS: I see. What happened after the *VESTAL*? Did you have other duty at Pearl?

RL: Well, they put out an order then, anybody aboard ship without orders, come over to the receiving station, so I went over there. And I last about thirty minutes there, and they said, "WHITNEY."

Well, then, I knew then I was going to be a tin can sailor. And the *WHITNEY* was my older brother's ship.

MS: Oh.

RL: But he was already in San Diego on leave, 'cause he just shipped over. I stayed on the *WHITNEY* then until the 28th of December, then went over to the destroyer *PHELPS*, so there were four ships in twenty-one days.

MS: Kind of get confused on answering where your home was, huh?

RL: Right now, I'm kind of (inaudible) about where home is.

MS: (Chuckles) And of course, the *PHELPS* saw a tremendous amount of the war early on.

RL: Oh yeah. We was down in Bougainville, Coral Sea, Midway, Guadalcanal, Battle of the Aleutians.

MS: What's your feeling about tin cans versus battleships?

RL: Well, once you get kind of used to it, they're about the best duty there is.

MS: You liked it better than battleship duty?

RL: Oh yeah, yeah.

MS: When you look back to World War II, do you kind of think of the *PHELPS* as being the better of duties that you ever had?

RL: Oh, you bet. We had a good crew on her. She only lost one man in combat. That says something for the crew.

MS: Sure enough. Sure enough. And then you spent a little time state side?

RL: I come back right after the Aleutian campaign and I don't think I was as close to -- I think I was there four months. And I caught the liberty ship *ALAMEDA*.

MS: And then back to the Pacific?

RL: Then we started hauling groceries all over the ocean.

MS: (Chuckles) What ship was that?

RL: Well, her hull number was AK-125, her name was *Lesuth*.

MS: And you spent most of the rest of the war with her?

RL: Yeah. Yeah, I thought being on something like that, you know, non-combat (inaudible) I figured it might be, you know, traveling convoy even. But we went down to Redwood City and put 30,000 gallons of aviation gas aboard and then we took off alone for Samoa.

MS: By yourself, no escort?

RL: Yeah. We stopped in San Pedro and picked up eight dive bombers for deck loading, and then we took off.

MS: Wow. But you didn't like that as much as the tin can?

RL: Yeah, I liked it because it was good duty for a seaman.

MS: Oh, okay. Well, and then you ended up finishing the war with the liberty ship?

RL: Well, I was in San Pedro when hostility ceased. And they wanted to ship me back up to Pearl Harbor in a bosun mate pull, and I told 'em, I said, "I've been to Pearl Harbor."

And well, this little commanding officer, he wanted to know what I was going to do and I said, "I'll stick around." I said, "I'll ship over for a yard tug," but they wouldn't give it to me.

MS: So did you leave the Navy then?

RL: Well, I just told them good-bye, yeah. Took a discharge.

MS: (Chuckles) Time to go, huh?

RL: I don't waste time with decisions. I do it and do it quick.

MS: Well, at Pearl Harbor, during the attack, did you sustain any injuries?

RL: Very few. But the --- I had a hole in the side of my foot right above my rubber boot sneakers, and the guy that treated me was just a pharmacist's mate and he said it looked like it might have been from a nearly spent bullet. Just a nice, clean, round hole. Then I had a burn up here on the chest and one on the arm.

MS: Yeah. Yeah, you got off relatively easy, considering where you were . . .

RL: Well, the thing is, I never even thought about a purple heart until I was living down in Mississippi for a couple of years and I used to go over to this congressman's office, to talk to (inaudible) -- oh we had some good talks. He asked me, "How come you don't got a purple heart?"

"Because nobody give me one."

"Well, if I was you," he says, "I'd look into it."

So I got back to Iowa, I started working on it. Got to ten years writing.

MS: But you finally got it?

RL: Finally got it.

MS: Good for you.

RL: In fact, the senator brought it and presented it to me right before he died.

MS: Hey, that's great.

RL: So you know, I'll never bad mouth him.

MS: (Chuckles) You know which votes should be cast for?

RL: Hmm?

MS: You know which votes should be cast?

RL: Oh yeah.

MS: You, at this point now, you come back to Pearl Harbor how many times for reunions or visits?

RL: Well, we come back the first time in '66, and that time, I met the guy that led the raid on Pearl Harbor, Fuchida. I met him. He was traveling with Billy Graham, and I've been back east five years since then plus twice.

MS: That's great. And now we've got fifty-five years between the event and now. What kind of feelings do you have, with all that hindsight and all that history? What kind of feelings do you have now about the Japanese and Pearl Harbor?

RL: I'll still call 'em Japs. I get corrected for that one time and I told the gal then, I said, "They're Japs and they're gonna be Japs," I says.

But besides Fuchida -- and I outlived him too -- but I met the guy that shot Pepper Windon down, Mike KOO-WA-ROH. I met him down at Texas one time. He's a happy-go-lucky little son-of-a-gun.

MS: So you feel like on an individual basis, you . . .

RL: Well.

MS: . . . even the guys that were in the attack and all . . .

RL: I can't condemn a whole nation or a whole race. There's good ones and bad ones.

MS: And how about with the Pearl Harbor Survivors' Association, the *ARIZONA* Survivors?

RL: Well, I'm a life member of 'em.

MS: You feel like they do a good job as far as the commemoration and . . .

RL: I think so.

MS: Do we as a nation do adequately as far as remembering?

RL: No. Because too many people forget about it already.

MS: Okay. How can we go about changing that? Or what should we do, what direction should we go?

RL: I don't know. Kids in school are not studying enough history. Half of 'em can't read anyway. I get a kick out of almost when I got little things that I like to see people read and you know, pass 'em around like in a bar someplace. And you can't believe how long it takes someone to stumble through that.

MS: So you think maybe if we teach history a little bit more . . .

RL: I think the school should come down and do a little more history teaching.

MS: Well, how do you view the phrase, "Remember Pearl Harbor," now? How do you -- what does that mean to you, as far as this . . .

RL: Well, I believe in it.

MS: Because of national defense, or something different than that?

RL: Well, part of my own personal experience is that.

MS: Right.

RL: Well, I got a bumper sticker right now on my car, and I think I got the only one being displayed in Webster County, where I live. And it says, "If there hadn't been a Pearl Harbor, it would have been a Hiroshima."

MS: Hmm. Does that sum up your feelings on all of that too?

RL: You bet. A lot of people blame Truman, but he did the right thing. I've got a couple printed pages with me on this stuff, and I can't remember who sent it to me now, but it tells what Japan was ready to do if we had invaded. And that would have been

the biggest mistake this country ever made if they had. That's why good thing they dropped those bombs.

MS: So do you feel like the vengeance, or the avenging factor that the United States held after Pearl Harbor, you know, there was quite a spirit gathering kind of event. Do you feel like that we did what we set out to do as a nation, as far as putting Japan back where they need to be, as far as a defeated nation?

RL: Well, I think we done too much to put 'em on their feet. I don't think we should have ever gave 'em Okinawa back. And we sent an awful lot of technologies they didn't have.

MS: Well, we were a little bit too nice to 'em then afterwards, you think?

RL: I think so. But I'm not into big business, so I can't make those decisions.

MS: Well, if you could have your thoughts or your message or your feelings conveyed, say, a hundred years from now, your great-great-great-grandkids, and they were to come here and visit Pearl Harbor, visit the *ARIZONA* Memorial, what would you like them to remember?

RL: Well, we had a great bunch of people to begin with.

MS: Is there anything else that you feel would be important for them to remember?

RL: I just hope it's here for 'em to see.

MS: Okay. Well, very good. We're going to do our best to make sure it is still here. And through your sacrifice and the sacrifice of all your shipmates and all your servicemen of World War II, thanks to you folks we still have our liberty and the opportunity to do that. We thank you for that.

RL: Well, I figure I done what I could.

MS: You certainly did the job. Well, thank you for your time and coming out and seeing us and visiting with us today.

RL: Good.

END OF INTERVIEW